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‘Aesthetic Reaction’ and ‘Verbal Reaction’: Reader-response Criticism from Vygotskii to Voloshinov

When in the 1920s the Russian literary scholar and psychologist Lev Vygotskii examined the reactions literature can trigger in the reader, his intention was not to consider the text as a pure medium, technical resonator or tool of agitation. Hence, in his book *Psikhologičia iskusstva (The Psychology of Art)*, written in 1924, he advanced a theory of “aesthetic reactions” which could be regarded to be one of the most complex works on reader-response in the twentieth century. At the same time, Vygotskii’s theory provides an insight into the debate in the Soviet Union of the 1920s that sought to show artistic processes to be social and individual reactions beyond reflexology, ‘Freudianism’ and agitation.

Around the same time, the Russian literary scholar and linguist Valentin Voloshinov wrote a book about Freud’s psychoanalysis (*Freidizm*, 1928) and another on Marxism and the philosophy of language (*Marksizm i filosofīa iazyka*, 1929). This book too centred on (verbal) reactions that Bakhtin research would later rather receive as dialogism. Neither theory makes reference to the other, but it strikes me as worthwhile reading them as reactions or responses and as attempts to use psychological and formalist research in the service of Marxist philosophy and to save them from ideological polemics.

1 “Aesthetic reaction”

Let us begin with Vygotskii and the “aesthetic reaction”. In this context, aesthetic is not to be understood as an attribute; “the aesthetic” functions as a trigger, or, more precisely, as a stimulus causing a reaction. Vygotskii notes that “for the psychologist any work of art is a system of stimuli, consciously and intentionally organized in such a way as to excite an aesthetic reaction” (Vygotskii 1971, 24). Here, Vygotskii is at pains to point out that the aesthetic response is never merely individual but also social; it neither emanates from an individual psyche (that of the author), nor does it only encounter an individual psyche (that of the recipient). Hence there is no sense in attempting to reconstruct the psychology of the reader or the author via the aesthetic response, since this response does not have direct access to either of their psyches.

This is not the key to Vygotskii's thoughts on "aesthetic reception", however. In his literary analyses and experiments, Vygotskii observed that feelings triggered as part of the aesthetic reaction are not expressed by the reader, at least not in the sensorimotor sense. Instead of being manifested in clenched fists and trembling, they dissolve mainly in the imagination. This sensorimotor inhibition, he writes, is due to the very polar impulses of form and content. Since it is not possible to simultaneously raise and lower something or walk to the right and to the left, this tension can only be resolved in the imagination. Contradictory structures are thus resolved not via muscular activity, but in the activity of the imagination. Hence art's emotions are intellectual emotions, and this is the *differentia specifica* of the "aesthetic reaction".

"Aesthetic", in relation to the reaction, can thus by all means *also* be considered an attribute *too*; for Vygotskii, the reaction itself is aesthetic. It is the unity of the imagination and feeling that determines aesthetic reaction. Aesthetic reactions take place in the imagination, which is not to say that they are fictive; rather, they are a component of the imagination's activity that is influenced by emotions. In Vygotskii, reception thus goes far beyond the mere act of perception; it is the *interplay* of perception, emotion and imagination.

Here, he takes aim at the experiments conducted between 1912 and 1923 under the leadership of Georgii Chelpanov, the director of the Psychological Institute at Moscow University, and also at the GAKhN. One of the aims of these experiments was to measure immediate feelings or reactions to reading or viewing art. Vygotskii writes: "The response to art begins with sensory perception, but does not end with it. This is why the psychology of art must begin, not with a chapter on elementary aesthetic experiences, but with the two other problem areas—emotion and imagination" (Vygotskii 1971, 200 f). An "aesthetic reaction" is thus not a usual response to perceiving a smell or a colour; rather, the perception of this colour is merely the *precondition* for the developing emotion and the activity of the imagination, which themselves—in their holistic reciprocity—form the foundations of the aesthetic reaction. Vygotskii clearly considers the concept of the response in order not to limit art to perceptions; his idea of the aesthetic reaction includes processes that go beyond perceptual experiences (the imagination, emotion and cognition). He obviously seeks to distance himself from a "naive sensualism", as he puts it, whose empirical analyses and laboratory experiments would also have us believe they can tell us how art functions without analysing the work itself.

2 Reactology

Vygotskii's studies are directly related to the reactology of Konstantin Kornilov. While Vygotskii was already writing his aesthetic studies in the early 1920s, when he was still working as a teacher in Gomel' and head of an experimental psychology laboratory at the local technical college. But as early as 1924, the year he completed *The Psychology of Art*, Kornilov, who was running the Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow, brought him to the capital after hearing him speak at the Second Psychoneurological Congress in Leningrad, where he worked in Kornilov's laboratory as part of a collective project researching affective reactions. In 1924, the laboratory was headed by Aleksandr Luriia, then still the institute's secretary; it was very much part of Kornilov's "reactological research programme" (Keiler 2002, 41).

The term "reaction", then, denotes a concept that is clearly bound up with the discipline of reactology, which Kornilov had developed in examining reflexology and phenomenological psychology. As early as 1922, Kornilov distinguished between reflex and reaction, understanding a reflex in narrow physiological terms and a reaction as something biological. Reflexes, he said, were objective, reactions subjective-objective. In essence, Kornilov wanted to find a third way between objective reflexology and the subjective phenomenological psychology of Chelpanov. This third way would combine both objective and subjective methods. It was considered impossible to convert Chelpanov's research into a Marxist psychology, and hence he was dismissed from the Institute of Psychology; Kornilov's reactology, on the other hand, was supposed to cater to this very demand. Luriia critically notes that Kornilov's experiments were of no more experimental value than Chelpanov's; on the contrary, it was more a case of relabeling: "All laboratories were renamed so that their names contained the term 'reaction': there was a laboratory for visual reactions (perceptions), for mnemonic reactions (memory), for emotional reactions etc. All that aimed to remove potential traces of subjective psychology and replace it with a variant of behaviourism" (Luriia 1993, 41).

In Kornilov's reactology, "reaction" means a "response of the living organism to environmental stimuli" (Kornilov 1936, 12), applying to all biology (*obshchebiologicheskii*), from the most basic organisms to human beings. In people, however, every reaction also contains a "biosocial" component. Kornilov distinguishes, for instance, between "innate" and "acquired" (via one's origins) and between "reflexive", "instinctive" and "emotional reactions" (Kornilov 1936, 15). "Acquired reactions" are, firstly, "muscular-motor reactions" such as walking, running, work processes etc., and, secondly, other "verbal reactions" (*rechevye, slovesnye reaktsii*), which form a specific sub-group of "muscular-motor reactions". Kornilov's "verbal reactions" are not inter-individual, valid reactions dis-

playing the social element of speech, as Valentin Voloshinov would later write in his book on Freudianism. Rather, Kornilov considers the verbal reaction to be an event that has emerged in the process of human labour (the origin of language) and via social conditions (the development of language). Language or speech is a reaction to motor activities that humans perform.

Voloshinov sees things differently. He too speaks of a verbal reaction, but for him it is determined by the psychological, the physiological and the social or cultural. A cry in response to pain, he writes in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, is not a verbal reaction in his sense (at most, it is a verbal reaction in the behavioural sense or a Pavlovian reflex); rather, the cry is physical, devoid of the social element. It is only when valid interaction takes place between individuals that the cry becomes a verbal reaction, i. e. a signifier (Voloshinov 1973, 22). For Voloshinov, then, we can only speak of a “verbal reaction” if there is verbal interaction. For Kornilov, only motor interaction is the precondition for a verbal reaction.

While Vygotskii distinguishes, like Kornilov, between innate and acquired reactions, he comes to the solution that the “all human behaviour is to be understood as a system of acquired reactions” which are built “on a foundation of hereditary reactions” (quoted in Keiler 2002, 74). Vygotskii subscribes to a hereditary doctrine rooted in cultural history in which the newly acquired reactions always build on prior hereditary reactions and begin to replace them. However, what is much more important to Vygotskii than individual acquisition is social inheritance on the basis of collective social experience. This observation amounts to the notion that it is impossible to conceive of a reaction independently of the culture in which it occurs. If we also consider that the reaction is reflected in the individual’s conscious and in culture, for the very reason that it is part of cultural and not only individual experience, then every potential reaction can be reflected and oriented towards an act of perception that has yet to take place. Very much in the Marxian sense, Vygotskii calls this a “double experience” (quoted in Keiler 2002, 81) that is achieved by the conscious. Vygotskii terms the conscious itself the “response apparatus” or the “organism’s reaction to its own reactions” (quoted in Keiler 2002, 101).

3 Response reactions

Voloshinov too develops his philosophy of language in contradistinction to reflexology and behaviourism and their “primitive materialism” (Voloshinov 1976, 23). His basic theory is that the psyche is an organisational phenomenon.

For his theory of verbal reactions, he thus adopts not the physiological notion of the behaviourists, but rather Kornilov's concept. Bakhtin, in his early works, also speaks of a reaction or response-reaction, although he certainly does not employ the term in the context of behaviourism, reactology or sociology, but rather uses it in the sense of verbal response.

In *Freudianism*, Voloshinov seeks to consider the psychoanalytical conversation as a complex verbal reaction. He begins with the observation that Freud's "psychological construct" is based solely on the verbal utterances of the patient. Voloshinov's criticism is that Freud does not regard the verbal utterances or reactions from their "objective" side – that is, in terms of their physiological and social roots. The language used in the psychoanalytical conversation does not belong to the patient, he says, and hence it cannot be the expression of his individual psyche either. The "objectivist psychologist" (Voloshinov 1976, 78) may thus not believe a single verbal utterance the patient presents as self-observation. Rather, the patient's utterance must be considered in the context of the reciprocal relationship with the situation in which it occurs, in the conversation with the analysis. However, here, he argues, we have an encounter not only between two people who are entirely different in terms of their origin, sex or profession but also between entirely different speakers – that is, people who use language completely differently. However, because the patient speaks a language characterised by his social background and other circumstances, his utterances are not a sign of an individual statement or his individual psyche but are symptomatic of a social process: "Not a single instance of verbal utterance can be reckoned exclusively to its utterer's account. Every utterance is 'the product of the interaction between speakers' and the product of the broader context in which the utterance emerges" (Voloshinov 1973, 79, emphasis in the original).

Vygotskii, in his work after *The Psychology of Art*, sees the verbal reaction in the context of such a social process. In *The Psychology of Art*, he only hints at the cultural-historical dimension of emotional reactions when he writes that the aesthetic reaction depends on the reading experience itself. In his later writings, however, this insight dominates his understanding of the human psyche. Vygotskii recognised, Luriiia summarises, that on the "path of internalising the historically determined and culturally organised possibilities" of dealing with knowledge", "the social nature of man becomes his psychic nature" (Lurija 1993, 56). 'Alien' aesthetic reactions can be internalised to the extent that they become understood as one's own, individual reactions.

Unlike Luriiia, Vygotskii is thus not sceptical towards the notion of reaction; rather, he tries to find a foundation to Kornilov's concept in such a way that it can also support a terminological reform within psychology (Vygotskii 1997, 283 f.). While Vygotskii barely describes the processes of reaction explicitly in his early

study *The Psychology of Art*, he later explains that he uses the term “reaction” neither in contradistinction to Kornilov nor to denote a functional relationship between physiological and psychic processes – these would undermine their holism – or a mere reciprocity between individual parts. Rather, he is concerned with an integral relationship between psychological and physiological phenomena. In retrospect, he describes Kornilov’s method as mechanistically dialectical; he argues that Kornilov attempted to conduct a physiological investigation of conditional reflexes plus introspective analysis of psychic processes. It is this plus that irritates Vygotskii. For he is concerned not with a mechanistic connection but with an organic whole. He thereby advances an anti-formalist cultural theory, although he does refer to formalism and adopt its terminology and analytical methods. In the debates of the 1920s, the organic was considered a counter-model to the mechanistic and cumulative elements of formalism as formulated by, for instance, Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Medvedev and others, who oppose mechanics with the organic, the chain of individual parts with holism and addition with reciprocity. This is not the case in Vygotskii – who rather represents a kind of ‘organic formalism’ – not unlike Eisenstein, incidentally.

Luriiia too conducted studies intended to test the recipients’ reactions to text or words. However, unlike Vygotskii, he is interested not in the workings of the artistic or the aesthetic reaction connected to literariness but in discovering in his test subjects “hidden complexes” or “emotional experiences” that “influence behaviour in the subconscious” (Lurija 1993, 44). For this reason, Luriiia did not use artistically valuable texts as his foundation; he rather asked his assistants to construct a narrative themselves.

One, for instance, was about a thief who breaks into a church through a window and steals a golden candelabra, an icon and a crucifix. The subjects’ task was to memorise the story’s content but they were not allowed to show that they were familiar with it. They and other test subjects who did not know the story were invited to take part in an experiment. They were told to react to a list of around seventy words, ten of which were the ‘critical’ ones. They had to squeeze a rubber ball with their right hand and reply with words on the basis of free association. (Lurija 1993, 44)

Luriiia measured their reactions using Kornilov’s dynamoscope in order to measure “fluctuations in the intensity of motor responses as the objective expression of inner emotional conflict” (Lurija 1993, 43). He wanted to be able to tell from the fluctuations in intensity which subjects knew the narrative to which the ‘critical’ words belonged. He later used this method as a ‘lie detector’ with suspected criminals. If the suspects responded to details of the crimes – that is, to ‘critical words’ – with which they must have been familiar if they were guilty by displaying a “diffuse collapse of coordinated reactions” (of a motor and verbal nature), then

according to Luriiia they could be convicted as criminals (Lurija 1993, 46). Quite apart from the fact that here Luriiia believes in a more than questionable direct access to the unconscious, for instance via the activity of the imagination, and notwithstanding that Vygotskii would have always doubted such access articulated via language, there is another key difference between the two experimental and analytical processes: Vygotskii always insisted on an experiment's artificiality and abstractness, while Luriiia was determined, unlike Kornilov and Pavlov, to create experimental situations connected to the reality of the lives of the test subjects. These 'natural' situations were supposed to bring to light something 'natural' and ontological. Conversely, Vygotskii sought to show how "the action of a specific law" becomes visible. In relation to art, he thereby underlines its constructedness and places the experiment on the same level as analysis, which he terms "abstraction in thought" (Vygotskii 1997, 320). At no point is he tempted to attempt to trace the aesthetic reaction back to the author's psyche as Luriiia did; rather, he wishes to understand it as an artistic process.

4 Infection versus pathos formula

If, however, one compares Vygotskii's experiments with individual experiments conducted at the GAKhN using artistic material, or, more rarely, works of art, what becomes apparent is above all the difference between phenomenological psychology and Vygotskii's cultural-historical psychology. At the GAKhN, the focus was on researching aesthetic perception, that is, those experiments that Vygotskii had already rejected as incomplete *The Psychology of Art*, since they only consider the organism's perception of certain stimuli conveyed by the environment, the sensory components.

In *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotskii explicitly distances himself from an understanding of art that sees the work as a mere resonator, amplifier or transmitter of the author's psyche, that is, an understanding that postulates a direct effect. In doing so, Vygotskii refers in particular to the idea of infection (*zarazhenie*) Lev Tolstoi had elaborated in his book *Chto takoe iskusstvo?* (1897, *What is Art?*). Tolstoi postulated that the work of art is a medium of the author's feelings, assuming said feelings are honest and not a pretence. In this theory, the recipient receives the author's feelings, the work unfolding in its transmission, both in terms of form and content. Vygotskii ironically remarks, "If a poem about sadness sought to do no more than infect us with the author's sadness, that would be very sad for art" (Vygotskii 2001, 390). Tolstoi's reductionist theory of art based on direct transmission would certainly have been forgotten had Anatolii Lunacharskii not rediscover-

ered infection in elaborating his concept of agitation. Lunacharskii thereby makes Tolstoi's theory of art, of all things, the point of departure for post-revolutionary Marxist reception aesthetics. As early as 1904, in his essay "Osnovy pozitivnoi èstetiki" ("The Foundations of Positive Aesthetics"), Lunacharsky speaks of "aesthetic emotion" (*èsteticheskaia èmotsiia*), which also played a central role in the work of French sociologist Jean Marie Guyau in the late nineteenth century. In the early 1920s, Lunacharsky then considers art's role to be that of an "organiser of ideas and emotions". It organises, he writes in "Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia" ("The Foundations of Artistic Education", 1925), with reference to Tolstoi's "infection", "the emotions as a fighting force, as an educating force" ("organizuet èmotsii, kak boevuyu silu, kak vospital'el'nuiu silu") (Lunacharsky 1967, 440). Gorkii goes so far in his thinking on the potency of the word as to speak of verbal transmission or transmission of thought, a notion he developed by drawing on Wilhelm Ostwald's energetics, Naum Kotik's telepathy, Vladimir Bechterelev's studies on suggestion and Ernst Mach's and Richard Avenarius's writings on the affectional in art.

Sergei Eisenstein, on the other hand, is artistically close to Vygotskii. They were well acquainted with one another, Eisenstein having conducted stimulus-response experiments on the basis of Vygotskii's research on aesthetic reactions. In particular, Vygotskii's aesthetic reaction and Eisenstein's pathos formula are both based on a contradictory, counterfactual relationship between material and form (Vygotskii) or different stimuli (Eisenstein).

The example of Eisenstein, who spent several years developing ever-new reception experiments and reception concepts, also allows us to assess the fine line between totalitarian aesthetics and avant-gardist exploration of reception theories for their own sake ('effect as such'). Both Eisenstein and the theorists of proletarian art are of the opinion that art has to have a direct impact on the viewer, that art has to fixate him by transmitting onto him the emotions it depicts in its themes and its composition. And yet Eisenstein and the representatives of totalitarian aesthetics nevertheless in one crucial aspect: Eisenstein problematises the direct relationship between sense and the sensory system. His somatic aesthetics envisages a shift in sense via the attack on the senses.

While Eisenstein mainly works on the deautomatisation of artistic and social sensory techniques and hence also estranges the history of pathos, Vygotskii – at least in *The Psychology of Art* – primarily has in mind a critique of a history of perception that assumes that feeling is individual. Vygotskii foregrounds the social element of feelings, but not in the same way as Tolstoi and Lunacharskii – he writes: "But this experience does not happen as described in the theory of infection (where a feeling born in one person infects everybody and becomes social), but exactly the other way around. The melting of feelings outside us is performed

by the strength of social feeling, which is objectivised, materialised, and projected outside of us, then fixed in external objects of art which have become the tools of society” (Vygotskii 1971, 415).

For Vygotskii, it is the social aspect of feelings that deposits itself in the work of art and is stored there; it is not, for instance, a question of the author’s feelings seeking transmittance onto the community. He considers it a false assumption that the work of art renders the individual’s feelings societal; quite on the contrary, art enables social feelings to be experienced by the individual.

In summary, Vygotskii’s analysis of art is not only a contribution to the question as to what extent one can determine the effect of art by using scientific methods; it is also primarily a critical commentary on the political instrumentalisation of artistic research or the phenomenological and scientific approach to artistic processes. In particular, Vygotskii criticises research that hopes that its experiments measuring a work’s effects will help direct reception and thereby pushes art’s material, performative and formal elements into the background while also ignoring its social aspects. As a rule, such research completely overlooks the fact that a work of art is a site of complicated reception processes and believes in the transformation of individual feelings. Secondly, Vygotskii criticises experimental research on perception, since it too chooses not to analyse the complex interplay of form, content and material, but goes no further than measuring individual components such as colour, form and tone before transferring these elements into a theory of aesthetic perception. Moreover, phenomenological research on perception also forgets the cultural-historical aspects of perception – that is, its historical and social prefiguration. Vygotskii’s criticism, bound up with both proletarian reception aesthetics and phenomenological perception research, and his development of cultural-historical reaction research are perhaps his most important contribution to the reception aesthetics of the 1920s, rendering it compatible with today’s concept of performativity. However, if we ask to what extent the above studies, experiments and theories had an “impact” on the development of literary theories, then as far as, for instance, Voloshinov’s and also Bakhtin’s theories are concerned, it is a question of delayed, indeed anachronistic reception. Voloshinov and Vygotskii were not received in the context of New Criticism’s affective fallacy debate in the 1950s, nor did Vygotskii play a role in the context of the effect and reception aesthetics of the Konstanz School, which took up, here and there, Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic word, less so Voloshinov’s philosophy of language. Stanley Fish, who developed an affective stylistics in the 1960s in correspondence with the Konstanz School, asked himself similar questions, however, with regard to the individual or social reaction: “When I talk about the responses of ‘the reader,’ aren’t I really talking about myself, and making myself into a surrogate for all the millions of readers who are not me at all? Yes and no.

Yes in the sense that in no two of us are the responding mechanisms exactly alike. No, if one argues that because of the uniqueness of the individual, generalization about response is impossible” (Fish 1970, 141). What we are dealing with, then, is rather a failed or belated transfer of theory that has taken place only tentatively in recent years. This holds not only for the reception of Vygotskii’s and Voloshinov’s research but also for the knowledge produced by the GAKhN experiments. These experiments and Vygotskii’s criticism of them have yet to play a role in empirical studies on the affective turn (*inter alia* Brian Massumi 1995), empirical aesthetics (*inter alia* Menninghaus et al. 2015) and so-called Neuro Literary Criticism (Michael Holquist).

Translated by John Heath

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